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ABSTRACT

A stratified random sample of 200 junior and senior undergraduates at the University of Maryland, College Park, was asked to complete a 51 item problem check list. This checklist covered six areas: typical university concerns, psychological concerns, cultural concerns, sexual relations concerns, racial concerns, and group living concerns. The most serious problems reported for all students involved vocational decisions, managing time, studying, and negotiating the university system. Least serious problems tended to be more social and involved fraternities and sororities, activities, experiencing discrimination, and joining groups. Further analyses indicated that Hispanics had more problems with finding scholarships and other financial aid than other groups, whites expressed more problems of sexual adjustment than blacks, and blacks expressed more problems relating to racism than the other groups. A factor analysis of student responses showed that six factors describe how students group their problems: Alienation, Financial Aid, Study Skills, Residence Related, Negotiating the University System, and Discrimination. (Author/AM)



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# A COMPARISON OF PROBLEMS PERCEIVED BY MINORITY AND WHITE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Dennis W. Webster, William E. Sedlacek
and Javier Miyares

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## Summary

A stratified random sample of 200 junior and senior undergraduates at the University of Maryland, College Park, were asked to complete a 51-item problem check list. A return rate of 74% (N=148) was achieved (29 American Indians, 30 Asian Americans, 26 black Americans, 29 Hispanic Americans and 32 white Americans). The most serious problems reported for all students involved vocational decisions, managing time, studying, and negotiating the University system. Least serious problems tended to be more social, and involved fraternities and sororities, activities, experiencing discrimination, and joining groups.

Further analyses indicated that Hispanics had more problems with "finding scholarships and other financial aid," than other groups, whites expressed more problems of "sexual adjustment," than blacks, blacks expressed more problems in "feeling you are a victim of racism" and "experienced more discrimination because of your race," than the other groups (1=extremely serious; 5 =not serious at all). A factor analysis of student responses showed that six factors describe how students group their problems: Alienation, Financial Aid, Study Skills, Residence Related, Negotiating the University System, and Discrimination.

For a number of years, research has focused on identifying the problems students experience throughout their college life (e.g., Ginn, 1975; Potkay and Fullerton, 1973), and on determining which problems students might bring to a college counseling center. Although much attention has been given to this area of research, little can be said in the way of a conclusion that can accurately describe typical student problems. For the most part, researchers and counseling service personnel have utilized general categories such as educational-vocational, emotional-social, college routine, vocational choice, and adjustment to self and others, to describe the kinds of problems students bring to them (Warman, 1960; Resnick and Gelso, 1971; and Kohlan, 1975). However, these appear to be general categories which might be descriptive of a variety of phenomenological experiences. Further specification of problems experienced by students in college remains a formidable task, since their problems may be more complex than the forms of assistance they receive are able to resolve (Penny and Buckles, 1966). In addition, student problems may be even more diverse as increasing numbers of nontraditional students (i.e., those from groups not previously enrolled in large numbers) seek a higher education.

Gibbs (1975), speaking specifically of the increase in blacks at predominantly white universities, suggests that black students experience a greater range of problems than those experienced by the majority student population. She asserts that "The sudden growth of a group of a different racial and cultural background was accompanied by problems of academic, social and psychological adaptation to the university milieu " (p.43). It seems feasible that these remarks would also hold true for nontraditional groups other than blacks. As the number of students of various cultures increases, it is expected that problems the different groups experience

will need to be investigated thoroughly.

Some researchers have suggested that more attention be given to issues of how nonblack minority group members view their problems. For instance, among Asian American students, it is not discernible whether low utilization of professional helpers (e.g., psychotherapists) is due to low rates of psychopathology or to cultural values inhibiting self-referral (Kitano, 1969; Sue and Sue, 1974; and Webster, 1977). Asian-American students may find it less threatening to visit a counseling center where they may discuss educational-vocational problems primarily, and while discussing these concerns, some issues of a more personal-emotional nature may legitimately be discussed (Sue and Kirk, 1975).

The above studies have been cited as examples of recent research into the problems experienced by minority groups. There appears to be a need for additional comparison studies indicating whether minority groups differ from each other and from the white majority in their perceptions of what their major problems are and the relative seriousness of the problems. A start was made in this direction as Westbrook, Miyares, & Roberts (1977) found no indication that the problems of white and black students were significantly different from each other. They felt that the apparent equality may be an artifact since both groups may view their problems as being of an equally severe nature.

The purpose of the present study was to compare the perceptions of the nature and seriousness of problems among American Indian, Asian American, black American, Hispanic American and white American students.

## Method

A stratified random sample of 200 upperclass (junior and senior) undergraduate students at the University of Maryland, College Park was asked to participate in the study (40 each from the self-reported classifications of

American Indian, Asian American, black American, Hispanic American and white American). The sample was 54% female and 46% male. 43% lived in University residence halls, 32% in parents' homes, and 24% in off-campus apartments, and nearly all students (99%) had a declared major.

Students were mailed an anonymous, 51 item problem check list covering six areas (typical university concerns, psychological concerns, cultural concerns, sexual relations concerns, racial concerns, and group living concerns) developed by Westbrook and Smith (1976), and Westbrook, Miyares and Roberts (1977) Six independent raters judged the items from the present study to be representative of at least one of these six clusters.

Questionnaires were color coded by classification to allow verification of racial/cultural group while maintaining anonymity. Nonrespondents were followed up by postcard, letter and telephone.

Data were analyzed by analysis of variance, student-Newman-Keuls post hoc tests, and principal components factor analysis with squared multiple correlation as the communality estimate and factors with eigenvalues greater than one rotated to a varimax solution.

## Results

A return rate of 74% (N = 148) was achieved (29 American Indians, 30 Asian Americans, 26 black Americans, 29 Hispanic Americans, 32 white Americans, 2 unspecified). After checking for consistency of reported racial/cultural group it was found that only four of the original American Indian sample reported themselves as American Indian on the questionnaire. All 25 others reported themselves as white. This raises serious doubts about the validity of the reporting for this particular group, hence the entire American Indian sample was dropped from the analyses. It is likely that a legitimate confusion, with whites indicating "Native American" at the time of registration at the University, combined with facetious intent, accounts for much of the discrepancy.

The analyses of variance and post hoc tests indicated that four items discriminated among the four remaining groups at the .05 level. Hispanics had more problems with "finding scholarships and other financial aid" than other groups (Means: Hispanic 2.91, Asian 3.52, black 3.76, white 3.81). Whites expressed more "problems of sexual adjustment" than blacks (Means: white 3.63, black 4.40). Blacks expressed more problems in "feeling you are a victim of racism" (Means: blacks 3.37, Asian 3.96, whites 4.31, Hispanic 4.45), and "experienced discrimination because of your race," (Means: black 3.28, Asian 4.13, Hispanic 4.45, white 4.63) than the other three groups (1-extremely serious, 5 = not serious at all).

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the most and least serious problems for all students, disregarding racial/cultural group. Most serious problems involved vocational decisions, managing time, studying and negotiating the University system. Least serious problems tended to be more social, and involved fraternities and sororities, activities, experiencing discrimination, and joining groups.

Table 2 indicates that six factors were able to account for 86% of the common variance in responses from all students, regardless of racial/cultural group. The factors were labeled Alienation, Financial Aid, Study Skills, Residence Related, Negotiating the University System, and Discrimination.

## Discussion

Westbrook et al. (1977) reported that "either no differences existed between black and white students' counseling needs or all students experienced different problems within the problem areas surveyed as being equally severe in nature. Results of the current study , indicating that all groups perceived a majority of problems presented on the Student Problem Checklist as equally serious, support Westbrook's latter assumption. It seems plausible that differential counseling needs are difficult to assess using instruments

such as the Student Problem Areas Survey (Westbrook et al., 1977) because of such apparent patterning of responses.

Since only four items discriminated among the four groups, these results may be due to chance (see Sakoda, Cohen and Beall, 1954). Two of the significant items also had heterogeneous variances among the subgroups. However, the significant results were internally consistent and interpretable. That Hispanic students may be having more trouble with financial aid is not surprising since they are a more recently emerging minority on many campuses including Maryland, and it is likely financial aid programs aimed at Hispanics have lagged behind their needs.

That white students are particularly concerned with problems of sexual adjustment is compatible with the general literature on clientele in college counseling centers,who have largely been white over the years (Collins and Sedlacek, 1972).

The literature also consistently supports the point that blacks are very concerned with racism and race discrimination (Carrington and Sedlacek, in press). The current study indicates that it is perceived as a greater problem for blacks than for other minorities. The percpetion of problems should not always be considered in a negative context. There is support for the conclusion that those minority students who are able to perceive and understand racism and are capable of realistic self-appraisal in all areas (academic and non-academic) are more likely to remain in college and achieve higher grades (Sedlacek and Brooks, 1976).

Interestingly, all students regarded academic-vocational issues and working their way through the University system as their biggest problems. Running up against the system could be considered a form of racism ("studentism?"), and in many ways may be similar for all cultural/racial groups. These results certainly present some strong evidence that students need a change agent function in the student personnel services provided to them. Despite interest and discussion, most student services remain traditional and individually oriented

at most institutions (Sedlacek and Horowitz, 1974).

The least problems were reported with social life, activities and race and sex discrimination. These data suggest that more University resources could be shifted to providing help in the serious problem areas and away from those considered less serious by the students. However, the reader is reminded that the participants in this study were upperclass students, and hence perhaps more adjusted and homogeneous than freshmen. If, in fact, problem areas are viewed differently by upperclassmen and underclassmen (Carney & Barak, 1976; Westbrook et al., 1977), then some variance in students' expressed counseling needs are to be expected as they progress through the University.

Apparently there are some problems which are not resolved as students advance in class standing, but are viewed as serious concerns throughout the student's college career. Research based on the same University population used in this study indicates that as freshmen, students who are currently enrolled as juniors and seniors, expected selecting a major or career to be the most difficult adjustment to college life, along with studying efficiently and budgeting time wisely. (Christensen and Sedlacek, 1973; Fago and Sedlacek, 1974). Results of the present study and one by Carney and Barak (1976) suggest that these remain prominent problems despite students' obvious foresight. While students are able to predict these areas of difficulty, they do not seem to be able to resolve them.

The factor analysis yields clues as to how the students organize their perceptions of their problems. If student affairs' offices were similarly organized, it might provide for optimum deployment of resources. The areas of financial aid, study skills, residence issues and discrimination commonly have student services directly concerned with them. Alienation is likely covered through a counseling or mental health service. That alienation is an important problem area has been demonstrated for students in general (Schmidt and Sedlacek, 1972) and for prospective students. That is, accepted applicants may not enroll because of fear of alienation,

particularly because of the size of a large institution (Carrington and Sedlacek, 1975). Thus, it is worth considering organizing a service directly aimed at problems of alienation, perhaps as part of a counseling center.

The issue of negotiating the university system has been discussed previously and now receives further support as a unique constellation of student problems. Cutting red tape and helping students through the system may be done in many or all student services offices, but serious consideration should be given to providing an office of change agentry or student advocacy independent of any particular content area.

In conclusion, this study provides information on a number of student problems unique to a racial/cultural group, as well as some common to all students. It is hoped that an analysis of those problems, coupled with an organization of services around how the students see the problems, can substantially improve the quality of student life.

Table 1.

Most and Least Serious Problems for All Students

| Most Serious Problems | Mean* | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Making decisions about future vocation or career | 3.01 | 1.34 |
| 2. Managing your time | 3.07 | 1.14 |
| 3. Studying efficiently | 3.14 | 1.07 |
| 4. Negotiating the University system | 3.20 | 1.17 |
| 5. Not getting courses you would like | 3.22 | 1.27 |
| 6. Improving study habits and skills | 3.25 | 1.12 |
| 7. Trying to get changes in University rules and regulations | 3.28 | 1.19 |
| 8. Discovering where and by whom decisions are made | 3.31 | 1.13 |
| 9. Maintaining satisfactory grades | 3.43 | 1.23 |
| 10. Achieving self-development or fulfillment | 3.43 | 1.26 |
| **Least Serious Problems** | | |
| 1. Deciding whether or not to form a fraternity or sorority | 4.49 | 0.97 |
| 2. Experienced discrimination because of sex | 4.34 | 0.82 |
| 3. Lack of opportunity for interacting with members of your own ethnic background | 4.18 | 1.15 |
| 4. Problems with dormitory policies | 4.16 | 1.08 |
| 5. Finding a group to join | 4.16 | 1.06 |
| 6. Experienced discrimination because of your race | 4.15 | 1.18 |
| 7. Having trouble relating to people of your own ethnic group | 4.14 | 1.11 |
| 8. Difficulty organizaing students of the same ethnic group as yourself | 4.14 | 1.25 |
| 9. Not receiving information about social, athletic activities, etc. | 4.10 | 1.03 |
| 10. Problems arising from religious, philosophical or cultural beliefs | 4.08 | 1.11 |

* 1 = Extremely serious; 5 = not serious at all

Table 2.

Factor Loadings, Means and Standard Deviations on Six Factors for All Students

| Item No. | | Factor Loading | Mean* | S.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Factor I - Alienation** | | | |
| 43 | Overcoming lonliness | .80 | 3.62 | 1.32 |
| 21 | Feeling alienated | .74 | 3.60 | 1.31 |
| 35 | Meeting new people and making friends at school | .71 | 3.73 | 1.19 |
| 37 | Finding a group to join | .59 | 4.16 | 1.06 |
| 23 | Not able to become involved in extracurricular activities | .54 | 3.87 | 1.22 |
| | (Explains 48% of the common variance) | | | |
| | **Factor II - Financial Aid** | | | |
| 34 | Finding scholarships and other financial aid | .72 | 3.54 | 1.40 |
| 14 | Not receiving a loan for which you applied | .69 | 4.07 | 1.29 |
| | (Explains 11% of the common variance) | | | |
| | **Factor III - Study Skills** | | | |
| 2 | Improving study habits and skills | .85 | 3.25 | 1.12 |
| 3 | Studying efficiently | .84 | 3.14 | 1.07 |
| 4 | Managing your time | .56 | 3.07 | 1.14 |
| 1 | Finding a good place to study | .51 | 3.78 | 0.94 |
| | (Explains 9% of the common variance) | | | |
| | **Factor IV - Residence Related** | | | |
| 22 | Wanting to change roommates | .84 | 3.95 | 1.19 |
| 20 | Having conflicts with roommate | .79 | 3.91 | 1.23 |
| 39 | Problems with dormitory policies | .58 | 4.16 | 1.08 |
| 28 | Dissatisfied with living arrangements | .54 | 3.90 | 1.23 |
| | (Explains 7% of the common variance) | | | |
| | **Factor V - Negotiating the University System** | | | |
| 8 | Finding out information about University rules and regulations | .79 | 3.70 | 1.08 |
| 7 | Discovering where and by whom decisions are made | .77 | 3.31 | 1.13 |
| 9 | Trying to change University rules and regulations | .75 | 3.28 | 1.19 |
| 5 | Negotiating the University system | .57 | 3.20 | 1.17 |
| | (Explains 6% of the common variance) | | | |
| | **Factor VI - Discrimination** | | | |
| 44 | Feeling you are a victim of racism | .81 | 3.99 | 1.15 |
| 51 | Experienced discrimination because of your race | .78 | 4.15 | 1.18 |
| | (Explains 5% of the common variance) | | | |

* 1= extremely serious; 5 = not serious at all

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